ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 5
PART II

LOS ANGELES TIMES
5 August 1985

Soviets' Empty Promises on Rights

Reviews Focus Attention on Failure to Live Up to Helsinki Pact

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Ten years ago President Gerald R. Ford, joining 34 other heads of state in signing the Helsinki accords, said that "history will judge this conference . . . not by the promises we make but by the promises we keep."

It was good theater, and it was appropriate. Unfortunately, the Soviets have not kept the human-rights promises embodied in the document that they signed at the 1975 Conference on European Security and Cooperation at Helsinki.

This doesn't mean that the whole thing was a mistake. There is great value in maintaining an international forum in which the Soviet Union can be brought to public account for the systematic denial of fundamental rights to its own people. Review conferences, such as the one held last week in Helsinki on the 10th anniversary of the signing of the accords, provide that forum.

The 1975 Helsinki conference came about because of Moscow's anxiety to win international recognition of the East-West boundaries set by force of Russian arms in World War II. They didn't get all that they wanted, but the other signatories did, in effect, validate the permanence of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe.

In order to gain Western approval of this portion of the agreement, however, the Soviets had to accept a package of human-rights guarantees covering such things as freedom of thought, religion and emigration, and "the right of the individual to know and act upon his rights."

The West now has the same right to insist that Moscow live up to the human-rights provisions of the Helsinki accords as the Russians have to insist on Western adherence to the language dealing with international frontiers.

Since the signing of the pact, working conditions for Western journalists in Soviet Bloc countries have improved. The provision on reunification of families, especially important to West Germans, has helped. With some exceptions, Moscow has given advance notice of military maneuvers, in keeping with the agreement.

On balance, however, the Soviet performance has been dismal. The number of Jews allowed to emigrate has shrunk to a trickle. Soviet citizens who marry foreigners still find it hard to leave the country, despite the Helsinki agreement's provisions to the contrary.

The fate of the 100-odd Soviet citizens who formed a Helsinki Watch Committee to monitor the compliance of their government with the Helsinki accords (an activity that is specifically called for in the agreement) is especially relevant.

Fifty-one are locked up in prisons, labor camps and psychiatric hospitals, or have been exiled to places far from their homes. Four have died after years of mistreatment. Twenty have been released after serving sentences, but live under the threat of rearrest. Seventeen have emigrated to the West because of the threat of imprisonment. The remainder live in a constant state of intimidation.

Andrei Sakharov, the most prominent member of the human-rights movement, languishes as a non-person in Gorky, where he was exiled for the sort of criticism that is routinely voiced in the United States by civil-rights activists and members of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Then there is the experience of the Group for Establishing Trust Between the U.S.S.R. and the United States. This unofficial "peace" group rejects the "dissident" label, and avoids challenging the legitimacy of Communist rule. But the Kremlin runs its own tightly controlled "peace" movement, and doesn't allow free-lance agitation in this or any other field.

Members of the group are constantly harassed and discouraged from meeting with visiting Western peace activists. One key member, Vladimir Brodsky, has been accused of "hooliganism," a charge that could lead to a five-year prison term.

Ordinary citizens are not allowed to subscribe to Western publications. The incarceration of political dissidents in mental hospitals is routine. Religious instruction of persons under 18 is illegal, and religion in general is discouraged.

On one level the Kremlin blandly asserts that human rights, even as defined in the West, are fully observed. Moscow's fundamental position, however, is that the Soviet system offers true human rights: the right to a job, a place to live and three meals a day. (Never mind, as a U.S. diplomat reminded the Soviets lately, that the average Russian lives less well than an American on welfare.)

So far there is no indication that things will get any better under Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the new Kremlin leader. The arrests continue; emigration is almost non-existent. And the regime continues to display a bizarre sensitivity to human-rights accusations.

On the eve of last week's Helsinki review conference, the Baltic World Conference, representing *emigres* from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, convened a tribunal of international human-rights specialists in Copenhagen at which the Soviet Union was put on mock trial for its crimes.

The Soviets charged that the whole thing was organized by the CIA, and that European newsmen covering the event were "bribed" to do so. They also warned darkly that political relations with Denmark and Sweden, in particular, might suffer as a result of their allowing the events to take place on their soil.

Meanwhile, at a news conference in Moscow, Foreign Ministry spokesman Vladimir B. Lomeiko lost his temper and accused human-rights advocates in the West of being slave traders and debauchers of young girls.

Some within the Reagan Administration propose staying away from future Helsinki review conferences in light of the Soviets' contemptuous disregard of their own solemn pledges on human rights.

British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe had the right response: "The Helsinki Act established a benchmark by which to judge the way in which governments deal with their own people. Despite all the disappointed hopes, the Helsinki Final Act did light a beacon that continues to shine. We must continue to include human rights and human contacts on the agenda of our future meetings."

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